

The Mills of Ozark County, Mo.

by Keith Bridwell

Tucked away in remote corners of the Ozark Mountains in southern Missouri stand a few remnants of a simpler time, a time when retail commerce first greeted the settlers of the hilly, close-knit region.

From the 1860s until the 1940s, these grist mills - powered only by the force of moving water - served local farmers and their customers by grinding corn and other grains into textures suitable for cooking and for animal feeds. The mills also served as focal points for communities, and on occasion, branched out to include mercantile offerings and postal services. For many of those settlements, the mills were "the place to be" for social activities.

Today, many of the mills in the area around Gainesville - the seat of government in Ozark County - remain in operation, much as they were a century or more ago.

At one time or another since the 1860s, more than a dozen mills have served the people of the region. At least five of them are still standing and in relatively good structural condition. Three of them are in daily operation, grinding wheat, oats and corn, and selling their products to the public through on-site gift shops, or through modern plants in neighboring cities while maintaining the trademark names of the old mills.

The mills are all situated on active streams and rivers, and rely on water-powered turbines and paddle wheels to turn "burhstones". The distance between the two horizontal stones is varied by the operator to adjust the coarseness of the ground product.

The three operational plants are Rockbridge, Hodgson and Dawt Mills. (Zanoni Mill is not now in operation). Hammond Mill, dating from 1907, is nearby, but when it ceased operation in about 1940, the machinery was removed and all water was diverted from the mill dam. The structure - which is comprised of three floors above ground and one below - is now privately-owned and serves at times as a residence. At other times, the 3,600-square-foot structure is rented, and will accommodate up to 10 people. Fishing, hunting and exploring guide service is available, but "no telephone, no computer, no A/C, just a gentle breeze through the trees and the sweet smell of the river ... This is the place to vacation in peace and quiet."

It is located on the old Jacksonport Salt Road, which served as a main route between Springfield, Missouri and Jacksonport, Arkansas during Civil War times.

Hammond was once a thriving community with a post office, drug store, general store and a blacksmith shop. The mill ran 24 hours a day.

The other four remain open (Zanoni is open for special occasions, only by reservation), and have been substantially renovated after suffering through repeated floods.

Rockbridge - located on Spring Creek - is one of the more famous, and has welcomed U.S. Presidents and other high political figures over the years, primarily because of its remoteness and natural beauty.

The mill and village date to the mid-1860s. The paddle wheel is powered with flow from a "mill pond" - created when the creek was dammed and water was channeled to the mill side. It is the only mill still grinding flour and meal with burhstones.

A private trout hatchery and fishing resort was established at Rockbridge in the early 1950s, and the world-class Rainbow Trout Restaurant now serves some of the local delicacies. Spring Creek is now stocked with trout from the

hatchery, and has made a name as one of the finest trout fishing streams in the southwest.

Cabins at the resort are sometimes reserved years in advance by fishermen who are addicted to the beauty and solitude.

Many of the settlement's original buildings have been preserved, and what is now the restaurant was the one general store.

The Old Dawt Mill dates to the early 1890s, and is built on the North Fork of the White River, which originates in the Mark Twain National Forest. It is one of the more picturesque mills, because while it has been renovated, it remains largely in original condition. A little community - including a general store, cabins and old hotel - grew up around the mill many years ago.

Dawt is the only water-powered grist mill located on the North Fork, and the view overlooking the river is breathtaking.

On weekends, you can still view one of the mill-grinding demonstrations and purchase freshly-ground corn meal. Fresh baked goods can also be purchased at the front of the mill.

Native Ozarks historian Phyllis Rossiter Modeland said in her publication, "*The Mills of Ozark County*", "A tired wagon leans against the wall where the miller might have parked it many yesterdays ago. From the corner of your eye you can almost glimpse a riderless horse hitched to the rail in front, or a barefoot lad shooting marbles in the dusty road while paw's corn is ground inside."

"The North Fork River offers some of the best white-water action for modern canoes in the Missouri Ozarks, and the dam at Dawt Mill is part of the challenge. Since it's known as a 'canoe buster,' most non-experts slide their canoes through a shallow chute near the end farthest from the mill - or portage around the dam."

Hodgson Water Mill is a grand example of adaptation, since the spring it harnesses to grind grain originates from a bluff under the mill building. The spring provides almost 3,000,000 gallons of clean, cold water a day into Bryant Creek. In addition to the mill, that spring once powered a cotton gin, a lumber mill and a clothing factory. Prior to "rural electrification" days, power from the spring generated electricity for all the enterprises in the neighborhood of the mill.

Although the old milling machinery is still in place inside the recently-renovated building, the stone-ground bakery products bearing the Hodgson name are now produced at a modern plant in nearby Gainesville.

Hodgson is recognized by the Missouri Department of Tourism as the most photographed mill in the state, and the turbine-driven mill is touted as the best-known in the nation.

Since the water from the spring is a constant 58 degrees, the mill was in years past a popular site for neighborhood dances.

A camping area just across a paved lane from the mill provides the opportunity to enjoy this scenic wonder.

The Zanoni Mill still boasts the original "overshot" wooden wheel, which is powered by water from a hillside spring behind the mill, and travels by wooden flume to the wheel. That water then feeds into a small, scenic lake on land which surrounds a dazzling white mansion that has become a bed and breakfast establishment.

A mill has operated at the site since the Civil War era, but the present mill was built in 1905. The mill is occasionally used for wedding parties and other special events, but is otherwise not open to the public.

In earlier days, the mill was the center of a thriving community which included a post office and general store.

The mill, lake and mansion set in a valley which is stunning during colorful spring and fall foliage displays.

From the mid-1800s to the early 1940s, Missouri's grist mills not only produced much-needed flour, but they also brought farm families together for a few days of fun and camaraderie. As they waited to have grain ground, farmers and their families camped around the mill, sometimes for several days.

Many of the grist mills of southern Missouri and northern Arkansas were destroyed by fires set by Union soldiers during the Civil War, to prevent their further use by the Confederacy.

The mills began to shut down as railroads improved their transportation of goods. Although the Civil War shut down (or destroyed) a lot of the old mills, most were re-built when the war ended.

They were numerous throughout the mountain region, but Ozark County boasts a high concentration of preserved mills.

The mills are a testimony, not only to the quality of craftsmanship involved in their structures, but in the tenacity of their owners. Virtually all of them have been flooded repeatedly, but managed to survive and flourish.

Hodgson Mill lived through the worst flood ever recorded along Bryant Creek in 1982. The water reportedly stood more than four feet deep in the top level of the mill. Another flood, in 1985, brought the water level to almost three feet in the mill's upper level.

In those same years, Dawt Mill became an island in the North Fork of the White River, when water covered all but the top floor.

Highways in the county are well-maintained and marked, and all but one of the mills - Hammond - are accessible without ever leaving pavement. No fees are charged for touring any of the facilities, but Hammond is now a private residence and Zanoni is available only by reservation.

Gainesville is a quaint little mountain hamlet of just over 600 people, lodged between the quiet peaks of the Ozarks and numerous live streams and rivers.

It is a good "base camp" for travel to the individual mills - all within 30 miles. Several of the local businesses offer free detail maps of mill locations.

A single motel serves the town, but it is clean and modern, and has a good restaurant. Rockbridge and Dawt Mills each offer accommodations in the form of rustic cabins and lodges.

To reach Gainesville, Missouri from Wise County, Texas, take FM Highway 51 from Decatur to Gainesville, Texas, then U.S. Highway 82 to Sherman.

From there, pick up U.S. Highway 69 north to Checotah, Oklahoma, then Interstate Highway 40 east to Sallisaw, then U.S. Highway 59 north to West Siloam Springs, where you will intersect U.S. Highway 412.

Stay on Highway 412 through Springdale, Arkansas and through Harrison to Mountain Home, then north on State Highway 5 to U.S. Highway 160 three miles west of Gainesville. The total one-way trip is about 575 miles.

(NOTE: Phyllis Rossiter Modeland is a native of the Ozark Mountains, and was helpful in providing background information for this article. She authored the publication, "*The Mills of Ozark County - A Tour of the Past*" and numerous books relating to life in the Ozarks).

Hodgson Water Mill -



ATOP A FLOW OF THREE MILLION GALLONS A DAY, the recently-renovated Hodgson Water Mill is all that remains of a once-thriving business community alongside Bryant Creek. Products bearing the Hodgson Mill name are now ground in a modern mill in the county-seat town of Gainesville, Missouri.

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Dawt Mill -



GORGEOUS REMNANT FROM THE PAST "The Old Dawt Mill" is located a few miles north of U.S. Highway 160 and eight miles east of Gainesville in southern Missouri, and sets on the shore of the North Fork of the White River, where it has been since the early 1890s.

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Rockbridge Mill -



DATING FROM THE 1860S, Rockbridge Mill is one of the largest and most-completely restored of Ozark County's mills, and sets near Spring Creek, one of the southwest's premier trout-fishing streams.

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